OPERATIONALIZING
INTELLIGENCE

### Shaping the **Information Environment** and Galvanizing **Western Action** Against Russia

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By now we know the first chapters of the Russian war on Ukraine. The story, however, would have been vastly different had the operationalization of intelligence not been matched to strategic public affairs. This article explores portions of how the West got that process and narrative right.
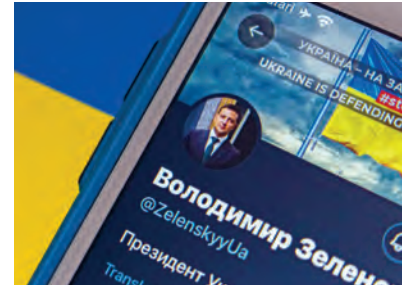
O N JANUARY 25, 2022, former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson addressed the UK House of Commons. He revealed "compelling intelligence exposing Russian intent to install a puppet regime in Ukraine" and, not incidentally, predicted that Ukrainian resistance "would be dogged and tenacious".

During a White House address on February 15, U.S. President Joe Biden directly contradicted a Russian assertion that it had withdrawn forces from the border. "We have not yet verified that Russian military units are returning to their home bases," Biden said. "Indeed, our analysts indicate that they remain very much in a threatening position."

Both nations, at the most strategic levels, began releasing intelligence assessments to inform domestic and international audiences of Moscow's mobilization on Ukraine's borders and the makings of an eventual full-scale assault. UK and U.S. intelligence communities predicted the February 24 assault almost to the hour. Even before the start of the war, the UK Ministry of Defence began to release a daily battlefield intelligence update on Twitter that became must-read material for anyone following the conflict. They lowered the classification of other intelligence to share not just with Allies, but with partners and friends around the world.

The declassification of intelligence, of late dubbed "radical transparency", is directly tied to numerous subsequent actions. First, it positioned the United States and the United Kingdom as legitimate and trusted sources of information for Allies, Western news media and international organizations. The information was accurate and the information fusion between intelligence and public affairs created trusting relationships between leading military and political leaders and members of the news media. Second, as a corollary to the first point, it galvanized Western sentiment about Russia's actions leading to the strongest possible set of sanctions against Russia. Third, it united the West in various international fora and contributed to one of the most successful summits in NATO's history. A summit where Ukraine's President Zelenskyy was present, where Sweden and Finland were set on a firm path to join the Alliance — thus doubling the border between Russia and the rest of Europe — and where 30 unified Allies stated: "We will continue to counter Russia's lies and reject its irresponsible rhetoric. Russia must immediately stop this war and withdraw from Ukraine."

All in all, a success for the intelligence communities. How was it achieved?

IN EARLY 2022, the U.S. intelligence community was emerging from two decades of mixed results. On the one hand, weapons of mass destruction were not found in Iraq, the high likelihood of an illegal Russian annexation of Crimea was not countered in a meaningful military posture, the speed with which Kabul fell was unforeseen. Syria and cyberspace activities compounded a general view of a staggering inter-agency colossus. On the other hand, terrorist leaders Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri were killed and near real-time intelligence sharing with Ukraine was delivering strategic and tactical assistance in the country's self-defence and confounding Russia.

Throughout those successes and failures, there was one common thread: They all featured highly selective releases and control of information rather than open disclosure.

This changed in 2022 with Ukraine. In the Ukrainian context, the strategic and calculated disclosure of information to Allies and the public painted a more complete and more

complex picture of Moscow's intent. The decision to share intelligence with Allies was made at the highest government levels. The Biden administration was trying to warn and rally Allies, friends, and partners, but was having difficulty communicating the gravity of the situation even to the Ukrainian government itself. U.S. Director of National Intelligence Avril D. Haines drove the idea forward; Biden saw the advantage immediately and endorsed Haines' strategy. "The President came back to us and said, 'You need to go out and share as much as you possibly can,'" Haines told CNN.

THERE IS SOME PRECEDENT for strategic transparency that dates back to the Cold War. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Kennedy administration publicly released classified reconnaissance photography that clearly illustrated assembly areas for Soviet-made ballistic missiles in Cuba as well as missile and aircraft shipments bound for the island. President John F. Kennedy capitalized on his advantage by outing the Soviet leadership as "liars" whose covert deployment threatened not just the United States, but half the hemisphere. Kennedy then went on an aggressive political campaign to rally the United Nations, European allies, and the Organization of American States. They were *first with truth*.

Excerpt from
Executive Order 13526
December 29, 2009
(The U.S. Government Publishing Office)

SEC. 3.1. AUTHORITY FOR DECLASSIFICATION

(c) The Director of National Intelligence (or, if delegated by the Director of National Intelligence, the Principal Deputy Director of National Intelligence) may, with respect to the Intelligence Community, after consultation with the head of the originating Intelligence Community element or department, declassify, downgrade, or direct the declassification or downgrading of information or intelligence relating to intelligence sources, methods, or activities.

In communications terms, the Soviet disadvantage was plain for the world to see. The United States was on the offensive; the Soviet Union was reactive and defensive. This was illustrated most dramatically when the U.S. Ambassador to the UN, Adlai Stevenson, confronted his nearly speechless Soviet counterpart, Ambassador Valerian Zorin, in the Security Council. "Do you (...) deny that the USSR has placed and is placing medium- and intermediate-range missiles and sites in Cuba? Yes, or no?" Stevenson charged. "You will receive the answer in due course," Zorin spluttered. "Do not worry."

Transparency and accurate intelligence reinforced the Kennedy administration's credibility, just as correct forecasting of Russian moves in Ukraine raises American credibility now. Faced with a clear and imminent threat, it is much more difficult for undecided countries to ignore entreaties to join the coalition. Moreover, the dichotomy could not be more clearly etched: The Americans and Brits were consistently outing the Russians as liars.

The strategic advantage was obvious and noticed well before the outbreak of hostilities. "To mobilize allies, U.S. officials have shared sensitive intelligence about Russia's moves; when they've detected Russian plots, they've disclosed them," David Ignatius wrote in the Washington Post. "These aggressive tactics have checked Russia's usual advantages of surprise and stealth."[1] Former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper noticed the shift as well. "The new doctrine is the potential to use intelligence as an information operations weapon," he said.

The website War on the Rocks wrote on May 11, 2022: "[D]ecades of growing public transparency about intelligence, paired with unprecedented transformation in the capabilities and availability of open-source intelligence, made it possible for politicians, diplomats, and defence communities to reveal, challenge and warn of Russia's warlike preparations and intentions." War on the Rocks went on to note that "this made it possible to seize the initiative from Russian attempts at denial, deception, and prevarication, refuting and discrediting such efforts before they could happen through a policy of pre-emptive 'prebuttals'".[2]

The Biden administration was able to generate a coalition well before the war started, which enabled them to impose sanctions, de-

ABOVE: Avril D. Haines, Director of National Intelligence, speaking to the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee on May 10, 2022: "The interconnected global security environment is marked by the growing specter of great power competition and conflict, while transnational threats to all nations and actors compete not only for our attention, but also for finite resources."

liver weapons, and close borders and airspace immediately once hostilities broke out. The New York Times reported: "William J. Burns, the CIA director, confronted the Russian government with its own war plans. Haines (...) shared secret intelligence with allied governments to build support for the American assessment. And the White House and State Department shared some declassified intelligence publicly to expose Mr. Putin's plans for 'false flag' operations and deny him the pretext he wanted to invade (...) But as the information provided grew and the Russian war plan played out as Ms. Haines had predicted, European officials shifted their view. The intelligence-sharing campaign ultimately succeeded in uniting Europe and America against Mr. Putin on a series of tough sanctions."[3]

The political advantages also delivered strategic communications benefits that were plain to see. "[The policy has] thrown Putin's plans slightly off," noted U.S. Senator Mark Warner.[4] There was certainly a risk in predicting Putin's intent to invade, as the Biden ad-

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ministration would soon find out. But this was a high-risk, high-yield proposition. If correct, it would dramatically reinforce credibility in U.S. intelligence assessments and galvanize the coalition. This could mobilize Western nations if there were to be an invasion and perhaps even prevent a war.

Russia was unprepared and unequipped to fight a rearguard following information dominance in Georgia, Syria and Crimea. De-classifying and strategically releasing truthful, timely and accurate information not only put Moscow at a tactical disadvantage in being able to shape the information environment, it was also a strategic disadvantage because the simple act of responding to Allied information releases dug a deeper hole of Russian lies. Further still, crowd-sourced data, open-source and commercial intelligence, news media, citizen reporting, and civilian satellite photography give the public more information than ever before. All of this reinforced the accuracy and credibility of Western intelligence.

One example is a CNN story asserting: "Officials have also been remarkably detailed in public about the number of Russian troops they see amassed on the border — intelligence that has been backed up by commercial satellite imagery released by private companies."[5] Another example is the American and Ukrainian claim that a Russian parachute regiment sustained heavy losses while failing to capture an airport near Kyiv in the early days of the war. Using publicly available information and social media, the BBC was able to name the regiment and many of its casualties, thereby confirming the Western intelligence report.[6]

ON THE OTHER side of the Atlantic, the United Kingdom held a similar tack. The UK intelligence community, with an abundance of resources and expertise in the region, began to issue daily intelligence summaries on social media a full week before the invasion. These summaries, too, have proved largely accurate, reinforcing credibility and dominating the information space. For example, the same day the UK Ministry of Defence correctly asserted that Russia had failed in its primary war aim to capture Kyiv, Maxar Technologies published satellite photography showing the dispersal and withdrawal of the massive Russian spearhead that had threatened the capital.

ABOVE: Screenshot of a Twitter post with the first "intelligence update"[7] issued by the UK Ministry of Defence on February 17, 2022 — seven days before Russian's unprovoked assault. **RIGHT:** February 24, 2022, New York newspapers report on the invasion of Ukraine by Russian military forces. Photo by rblfmr/Shutterstock

This is unusual in British intelligence practice, which traditionally has been much more guarded than its American counterpart. "It's a very different approach from the past, when intelligence and information was more closely guarded," observed Malcolm Chalmers of the UK defence and security think tank RUSI (Royal United Services Institute). Moreover, the previous British experience with public intelligence estimates, on the situation in Iraq, had proven disastrous.

But with the novel release of reliable analysis and precise forecasting, public confidence in UK capability has grown and the intelligence community have learned how to use their tools more effectively. "What Britain and the West have learned from the last Ukraine crisis in 2014 is that if you don't actively use your intelligence to shape the narrative, then you will lose ground to Russia," Karla Adam wrote in the Washington Post in April 2022.[8]

The new strategy includes a significant change in culture, but it has full buy-in from intelligence community leadership. Speaking publicly in March 2022, Government Communications Headquarters Director Jeremy

Fleming noted how quickly his agency moved to declassify information specifically to stay ahead of Moscow. "In my view, intelligence is only worth collecting if we use it," he said. "So I unreservedly welcome this development."[9]

Inevitably, we must consider Russia's strategy and response. Russia's reputation for prowess in hybrid warfare as well as malicious misinformation and disinformation campaigns has been badly damaged along with perceptions of other land capabilities. Although that could easily change, the fact remains that Russian disinformation has been completely overwhelmed by the West, in the West. As the war grinds on, this increasingly looks true from a global perspective.

The West's information environment favours transparency and openness, two traits not associated with Putin's Russia. By controlling all media in Russia, including social media, and pumping his propaganda directly into Russian homes, Putin has preserved his popularity and thus his political control. From this perspective, we should consider the possibility that this was a primary war aim when he invaded his neighbour in February.

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"The pre-emptive release of relevant intelligence effectively neutralizes disinformation and deception, the cynical Janus of hybrid warfare."

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Photo by Dmytro Larin/Shutterstock

Following Russia's seizure of Crimea in 2014, the Russian disinformation model appeared to ascend. It posed a considerable threat to Western political culture and society. For them, our model of democratic government, free expression, and popular communication were not strengths, but seemed to be weaknesses to be exploited. Since the objective of the disinformation model is not *control* but *confusion*, the Western model could easily drown in a torrent of untruth.
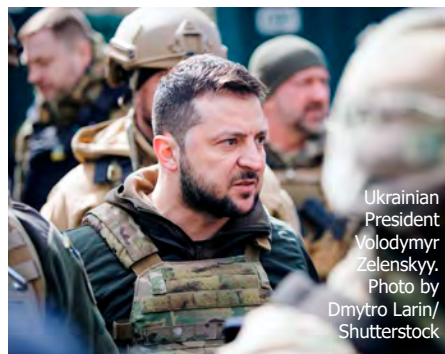
Fortunately, the advantages to the Western approach are now clear. Radical transparency raises political credibility. That credibility accelerates collective decision-making, which is crucial in a crisis, and the aggressive, pre-emptive release of relevant intelligence effectively neutralizes disinformation and deception, the cynical Janus of hybrid warfare. A strategy of radical transparency capitalizes on our natural advantages, while exploiting the weaknesses of the adversary. We are once again fighting on our home field. The result of radical transparency was and is a galvanized, united, active West that has delivered the most robust suite of sanctions against Russia possible.
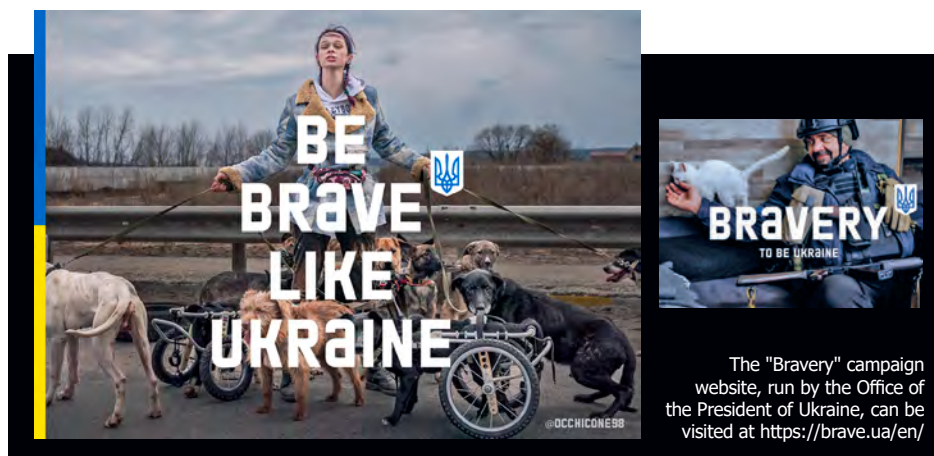
AS A COROLLARY, it also gave space and breath to bring forward the central character of this war, alongside the efforts of the Ukrainian defence and people, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Zelenskyy now appears to be the indispensable leader: the right person in the right place at the right time. He was initially dismissed by Russia as a comedian and actor, a political novice thoroughly out of his depth in office. But his extraordinary abilities were hiding in plain sight: Zelenskyy is a savvy political operator and an innovative communicator — a good skill set to have in a crisis.

Zelenskyy was elected president in 2019 on a broad anti-corruption platform. He had rocketed to fame portraying a schoolteacher unexpectedly hoisted to Ukraine's presidency. His satirical TV show, "Servant of the People", was a hit. Zelenskyy honed his communication technique during the campaign. Often called the first "virtual" or "crowdsourced" campaign, he held no rallies, bought no advertisements, conducted no interviews, skipped every debate, and issued no platform. The Ukrainian media complained that he was ignoring their requests for transparency. But Zelenskyy, using social media, especially Instagram, was communicating to his people without intermediation. This gave him several advantages as well: He controlled the message and, therefore, the campaign's narrative, he reached his audiences immediately, he solicited direct feedback from which he could effectively poll his followers in real time, and he maintained authenticity by using his own voice.[10]

Zelenskyy's campaign then evolved into a cutting-edge communications operation that could beat Russia at its own game. Ukraine's internet network is highly dispersed domestically. Ukraine has the same number of international junctions as Russia (seven), with a fraction of Russia's population and land mass. Four of the Ukrainian junctions are located in the western part of the country, making it impossible for Russia to cut off Ukraine from the rest of the world. This has proved a communications lifeline as Ukrainian citizens, soldiers and leaders have poured out content to the world in real time.

Notwithstanding pre-crisis missteps, Ukraine pivoted sharply to a very effective campaign message developed by Banda, a Kyiv-based advertising firm. Creative Director Egor Petrov and General Manager Dima Adabir pitched a campaign called "Bravery" (Сміливість) to Mykhailo Fedorov, Ukraine's Vice Prime Minister and Minister for Digital Transformation. Federov in turn got Zelenskyy's immediate approval. The simple branding soon went viral, covering billboards, bank cards, juice bottles and online shopping sites. It even made the leap to London and then to New York.[11]

The "Bravery" campaign website, run by the Office of the President of Ukraine, can be visited at https://brave.ua/en/

Mykhailo Fedorov ✔
@FedorovMykhailo
🏴 Ukraine government official

Ukraine has meaningful and up-to-date branding @brave_ua. Due to the efforts of Banda agency this campaign became world-scale. 19 countries; 140 cities; 100,000+ screens. Ukrainian bravery is shown everywhere; from Times Square in NYC to floating screen in Stockholm. 🇺🇦=Bravery

6:05 PM · May 31, 2022 · Twitter for iPhone

Ukraine Weapons Tracker 🇺🇦
@UAWeapons

#Ukraine: What everyone has been awaiting for so long is now reality - a video of two Ukrainian M142 HIMARS MRLs firing guided rockets at the Russian targets.

436.4K views   0:09 / 1:26

10:18 AM · Jun 24, 2022 · Twitter Web App

ABOVE: (Left) Examples of Bravery campaign shared by Mykhailo Fedorov on his Twitter account. **CENTRE:** A popular aggregator on Twitter publishes battlefield videos and still shots daily. HIMARS stands for High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems. **RIGHT:** The Ukrainian capital Kyiv. Photo by Drop of Light/Shutterstock

The campaign found an abundance of source material: small acts of individual resistance by average Ukrainians. These stories could be easily captured and dispersed via social media. The message was simple but comprehensive: Ukrainians demonstrating to themselves, to the world, and to Russia, their will to resist. Sometimes these stories overlapped with combat successes, as Ukrainians used a smart phone app called Diia to share geotagged photographs of Russian formations directly with the military.[12]

Ukraine's strategy also includes information control, an echo of Zelenskyy's election campaign strategy. The president continues to communicate directly with the public by social media. He has hosted most Western leaders, whose visits are highly publicized, but conducted under tight security. He has addressed foreign parliaments from the President's office, allowing him to reach powerful audiences while demonstrating he remains in Ukraine with his people. Ukraine has used the release of casualty figures strategically: a total news blackout early in the war, followed by releases of combat deaths more recently to stoke international support.[13]

TO SUM UP, strategic openness and transparency as well as truthful, timely, accurate information has embarrassed Moscow's "question everything" communications mantra as well as its disinformation efforts regarding its invasion of Ukraine. The operationalization of intelligence has galvanized the West and resulted in sweeping — and increasingly damaging — sanctions against Russia. President Zelenskyy has capitalized on radical transparency to shape a brand and campaign that ties the war to the ideals of sovereignty and rule of law.

The lessons of this success must be harnessed and amplified if the West, NATO in particular, is to operate and help shape the information environment.

At NATO, multiple staffs are now working to frame efforts through work regarding cognitive resilience and defence, multi-domain operations and information sharing. That work needs to recognize the importance of radical transparency, the urgency of operationalizing intelligence and the vitality of public affairs. ✈

ENDNOTES

1   David Ignatius, "Biden standing strong against Russia on Ukraine," The Washington Post, February 3, 2022.

2   Neveen Shaaban Abdalla, Philip H.J. Davies, Kristian Gustafson, Dan Lomas, and Steven Wagner, "Intelligence and the War in Ukraine: Part 1," War on the Rocks, May 11, 2022. This echoes "be first with the truth," an aphorism attributed to General David Petraeus and enshrined in Appendix D to Joint Publication No. 3-24, Counterinsurgency, revised edition, November 22, 2013.

3   Julian E. Barnes and David Sanger, "Accurate U.S. intelligence did not stop Putin, but it gave Biden big advantages," The New York Times, February 24, 2022.

4   Ibid.

5   Ibid.

6   Mark Urban, "The heavy losses of an elite Russian regiment in Ukraine," BBC News, April 2, 2022. Will Steward, "Another top Russian commander killed: Elite paratroop colonel and his deputy are 'liquidated' by Ukrainians as death toll in Putin's army hits 7,000," The Daily Mail (London), March 18, 2022.

7   "Images show Russian military activity near Ukraine still high-satellite firm," Reuters, February 17, 2022.

8   Karla Adam, "How U.K. intelligence came to tweet the lowdown on the war in Ukraine," The Washington Post, April 22, 2022.

9   Ibid.

10 See e.g., Adrian Karatnycky, "The World Just Witnessed the First Entirely Virtual Presidential Campaign," Politico, April 24, 2019, and Christopher Miller, "Crowdsourcer In Chief: Ukrainian Funnyman Takes Unorthodox Path To Top Of Presidential Pack," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, February 28, 2019.

11 Ibid.

12 Abdalla, et al., "Intelligence and the War in Ukraine: Part 2," War on the Rocks, May 19, 2022.

13 Meaker